

Remembrances

Two Significant Teachers

by Peter Gibbon

BURTON RANDALL was not prepossessing. With hornrimmed glasses and a continual scowl, he hardly radiated the *bonhomie* that entices adolescents. He was also a slave driver.

Fresh out of Amherst, Randall had been hired in the late fifties by Shaker Heights High School to develop an Advanced Placement English program. I had heard that over a three-year period the program covered Aeschylus to Conrad, with at least two hours of homework every night. And it was rumored that Randall tolerated no interference from superintendents or parents who found his regimen excessive. I was placed in his one regular junior English section (probably assigned to him by an egalitarian principal). We were not spared.

The American literature anthology was a fat book, and we omitted no minor authors. We started with Cotton Mather and, as I recall, went through to Edgar Lee Masters. We of course had to master the assigned selection and to read the introduction; he furthermore *assumed* we would know something about the author and look up unfamiliar words. For the first time, I began looking things up on my own; and I enjoyed fielding Randall's questions and impressing my classmates with my newly-acquired knowledge. He required four- to five-page papers every month. I can still

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remember analyzing and commenting on "Mending Wall" and "Richard Cory," among other poems.

Friday was vocabulary day. Every week Randall gave us 50 words to define and use in sentences. (He gave us 10 of these words on Friday.) Every Thursday night my friends and I assembled, exchanged words, and quizzed each other in preparation for the weekly ordeal. I recall little horseplay at these nocturnal sessions, as if the instructor's sobriety had infected us.

Randall did not relish grammar, as he once confided to us; but because he had a stoic's commitment to the unpleasant but necessary, we would bring our *Warrior's* to class every other week and go rapidly around the room, doing exercise after exercise.

Randall was faced with the problem of how to deal with long novels while daily covering grammar and vocabulary and surveying American literature. He solved this by handing out a sheet (well in advance), specifying the novel to be read and key themes to look for. At the bottom of the sheet, he noted the day of the test. In this way, I read *Walden*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Scarlet Letter*.

To keep up with this exacting program, we had to read before breakfast, so every night I set my alarm. Slow writers (as I was) stayed at school until 5:00 p.m. on the days papers were due. Randall did not give extensions. To

juniors who were fortunate enough to have some other teacher, we would brag about our hours, like some workaholic executives.

Of course, Randall had to work as hard as we did. There were never-ending handouts with questions to ponder, information about authors, and terms defined. Quizzes and papers came back the next day with corrections. I distinctly remember being amazed at how one man in one evening could work his way through an enormous stack of papers and keep up that pace day after day.

Randall was absent only two or three days a year, and we dreaded those occasions. For us, there was no substitute to mislead or torment — merely a ditto with a composition to be completed by the end of the hour.

I do not remember much humor or excitement in class, but Randall (now that I think about it) was very young, probably knew that 30 juniors needed a tight rein, and was clearly obsessed with repairing our ignorance and making up for years of laxity and neglect.

Occasionally, because I worked on the school newspaper (which he supervised), I would have to visit Randall's inner sanctum, which was filled with cigarette smoke and compositions piled in boxes. Always he was hunched over the desk grading. He had neither the time nor inclination for small talk or banter. He would raise his head primly, answer my question in a cool and professional manner, and then return to his corrections.

Not all students were appreciative of this dour taskmaster. The girl sitting next to me was impervious to grammar and Emily Dickinson. I vividly remember the day that Randall returned one set of

compositions. One boy received his usual F, and without pausing to check corrections, ripped his paper in half and threw it in the wastebasket. Randall exploded, angrily threw him out of the class, and told him never to return; then he peremptorily reminded the class that papers represented his time and labor (and he hoped ours) and were to be destroyed out of his sight. I also remember the day when one student's excruciatingly bad paper was placed on the overhead projector, and we spent the hour following a red maze of corrections.

What did I get from Randall? I obviously learned quite a few words and some grammar. I read major novels and surveyed most of American literature. I was forced to write essays, both at home and in class. I remember being astonished at how much I had done in a year.

Chiefly, however, Randall was the first teacher I had who was not eccentric, foolish, or pedestrian. He did not court us, attempt a shallow intimacy, or plead with us to like literature. He was deadly serious about literature and insisted that every class and assignment was important and worth doing right. He exemplified in the classroom values that were instilled in me at home — commitment, hard work, perfection. After my junior year in English, I became a serious student. For that, I am grateful.

THE NEXT YEAR I had Jack Pickering. Jack was charming. He was witty, smooth, and irreverent, a top tennis player. He dressed in tweeds and smoked Camels. All the girls loved him. He had a deserved reputation for assigning long papers and low grades.

The very first night we had to read several chapters of *The Return of the Native* and write a paper about the heath. Formidable reputations are a great motivator for impressionable adolescents, and I worked all evening and the next morning. I was content with my B—.

I specialized in florid introductions (which impressed my stolid classmates) and an urgent, passionate style (which stressed sound more than clarity). Pickering gently tried to make my writing more spare.

We did not grind out the work the way we did for Randall. Pickering had been teaching for 10 years, so either out of conviction or resignation, he did not produce handouts or work his way through piles of homework. He *did* believe in long research papers for which we could pick our topics. I wrote on nature imagery in *Macbeth* and a rambling meditation on "Hamlet's Dilemma." They were my first attempts at major papers that required me to use my own judgment and to digest other critics; thus they were invaluable preparation for

college. Pickering was casual about day-to-day preparation, but serious about papers. Knowing they would be meticulously graded, we worked accordingly.

The class was large, his fifth section of the day. It met late in the afternoon and included an unusual share of dullards. Pickering was often visibly bored, weary, melancholy. One day he ruefully apologized to me for the tedium of the class and said he wished I had his first-period class. By the second semester, we were doing individual reports; he slouched in the back row, looking depressed. However, he encouraged me to do my report on John Donne; and I learned that poems did not have to be flowery or written about vales and skylarks.

I respected Randall and worked like a dog for him; but he was not approachable. I played tennis with Pickering; and he at least pretended to enjoy talking to students; thus I got to know him slightly. He must have wearied of students' attempted camaraderie on the tennis court (in my naiveté, I thought he coached for fun); but he was always amiable and witty and occasionally entered into our banter while still keeping the distance and aloofness that forced our respect.

He talked about modern authors — Conrad, Eliot, and Joyce — instead of just Shelley, Keats, and Pope. He encouraged questions, so I monopolized the class and peppered him endlessly and, I am afraid, somewhat griggishly.

Pickering was indulgent, but I remember one day — after my junior summer of college visits — I confided to the class that everyone in the East was reading an author named J.D. Salinger. He replied, "Yes, even in the provinces people have heard of Mr. Salinger." The class, weary of my insights, relished my discomfort.

Ironic intellectuals were not common in Shaker Heights in the 1950s. Pickering gave me a different way of looking at things, a new role model, a serious concern with ideas, an interest in modern writers. Against the backdrop of suburbia, he seemed intriguing, thoughtful, mysterious, even bohemian.

A dour, stoical, duty-ridden slave-driver and an ironic intellectual: In my last two years of high school, I was lucky to be taught English by two significant men. They instilled in me a love of literature, forced me to read critically and to write carefully, and suggested to me that teaching could be an important, even an exalted activity. ●